

promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which are in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

# The Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin

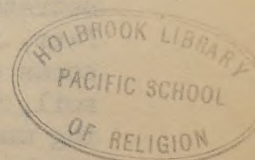
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## The Rural Minister and His Message

By Aaron H. Rapking\*



It would be interesting to go into a picture gallery to behold the portraits of those personalities who have been most influential in determining the destiny of America to date. I am certain that among them the rural minister would be entitled to a very important place. We would find there the portrait of Francis Asbury and other "prophets of the long road" representing one of the greatest fraternities and one of the most potent influences in our Western civilization. These prophets of the long, rough, unpaved road, with their saddlebags full of books, forded the swollen unbridged streams, braved the wild beasts of the forest, came in contact with great saints and great sinners, as they came to grips with reality while preaching the glorious gospel of the Son of God in the mountains, in the valleys, in the homes, and in the schoolhouses, in the house of God and beneath the stars, or under the sheltering branches of the majestic trees.

These men have been one of the greatest factors in laying a sure foundation for our democracy. It was these men, called of God, many of them limited in knowledge, who, with keen insight and foresight, at great sacrifice, laid the foundation stones for our great institutions of learning. They fanned the spirit of patriotism into a white heat; they challenged the drunkard, the liar, the racketeer to repent of their sins and flee from the wrath to come. In the homes around the fireside, in the camps, on the plantations, in neighborhood, county, and regional camp meetings they brushed aside the curtains and opened up wide and challenging vistas of right and wrong, heaven and hell, the low way leading to the slavery of evil habits, disintegration, and despair, and the highway leading to faith, hope, love, and a sense of destiny.

Today we find ourselves in a vastly different and changed world. The wilderness has disappeared; the old trails are now wide ribbons of cement, brick, and macadam, extending from coast to coast and into many of the out-of-the-way places. Bridges span the swollen streams; the little red schoolhouses are being combined into majestic consolidated schools; the mail carried daily brings messages from the ends of the earth to the rural homes; while in millions of rural homes the radio brings the voices of the king and queen, the

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\*Dr. Aaron Rapking has long been one of the warmest friends of the Christian Rural Fellowship and a staunch supporter of the rural church movement. Probably there is no one better qualified than he to speak for the rural minister and his message. Used with the kind permission of Dr. Rapking and of World Outlook.



president and the preacher, Nehru and Truman, and myriads of other voices around the world into the consciousness of those who tune in.

Fast-moving tractors driven by powerful engines, power for which farmers pay annually one billion dollars, move steadily across many of the fields and plains of America, replacing slow plodding horses, pulling plows, disks, harrows, drills, mowers, and other old-fashioned implements as if by magic.

A vast army of men and women, employed by state and federal agencies, are at work in the laboratories, in the experiment stations, discovering the secrets of growth and development of plant, animal, and human life. On the farm, in the community, county, state, regional, and national meetings, thousands of county agents, home demonstration agents, and hundreds of nutrition, soil, livestock, plant, and other specialists preach the gospel of better farming and better living. Through the 4-H club movement millions of boys and girls are being challenged and aided in living a foursquare life. Millions of farm women are banded together into group, county, state, national, and international organizations. One-third of the nation's farmers are members of one or more of the 12,000 cooperatives. Is there still a place for the rural minister and his message in this modern, moving, almost magic rural life?

The answer depends on the quality of the minister and his message. There is no place for the lazy, insincere, shiftless, selfish, bigoted, and conceited minister, who is long in his preaching but short in living the gospel he preaches. There is no place for the rural minister who looks only to the past for his message for today and for the future. There is no place for the minister who cannot look out of his study window and into the world of God and see God at work fulfilling the purpose for which the world, man, and the universe are being created. Nor is there any place for the minister who proclaims only a message of doom and despair; who claims to have special revelations from God conceiving the doom and the end of the world.

There is a large place and a great need for the rural minister and his message who, in humility and sincerity, lives and preaches the glorious gospel of the Son of God. There is great need for the rural minister, who, with a warm heart, a clear mind, and a firm faith in God and in man, can interpret the Bible and point out its application in terms of the life of today. There is great need for the rural minister who can interpret the tractor, modern farm machinery, the automobile, the radio, the moving picture, art, literature, the many discoveries of modern science, in terms of God and his place in the picture of the universe. In the midst of our noise, confusion, and contradiction, there is profound need for a voice fully dependable and above self-interest. We need rural ministers who can, despite the confusion, in education, in government, in politics, in the economic order, see evidences of God at work in the world in helping individuals, families, groups, and nations achieve the high and holy purpose of creation. We need rural ministers with vision who can see the possibilities of the redemptive process at work in the lives of men and women who bear the scars of injustice, greed, and lust for power in our social and economic order. We need rural ministers who are enjoying and growing in their fellowship with the matchless Christ who went about teaching and doing good. We need rural ministers who sense, feel, and understand the relationship of the individual to Jesus Christ in a personal, guiding, piloting, and saving relationship in the home, the neighborhood, the church, the state, and the world. We need rural ministers who have caught a vision of the blending of every right ideal and noble purpose and unselfish deed into the building of the Kingdom of God in the countryside, the nation, and the world.



No doubt the solution of many of our knotty, social, economic, farm, and intellectual problems await the coming of a type of rural minister who will mean to our age what Francis Asbury and the other prophets of the long road meant to our nation when the foundations were laid for our civil and religious liberty. With this type of rural minister visiting in our country homes, co-operating with our county, state, and federal agencies, vitally interested in the intellectual, economic, social, and spiritual welfare of our rural people, great progress can and will be made in making the countryside a place of charm, grace, and beauty in which boys and girls and men and women will develop and unfold as naturally as the crops on the farms that have available and ample plant food, moisture, the proper cultivation, and plenty of the life-giving sunshine.

The rural minister should have the training and the experience that will help him see and appreciate the relationship between soils and souls, the growing of crops and the development of personalities. He should have sufficient knowledge and training and experience that would enable him to help the farmer see "burning bushes" as he toils in the field or listens to sweet music of the birds, as the dew sparkles like precious diamonds on the grass in the morning. He should so relate his messages to everyday life that the challenge to grow alfalfa, to raise the production of his dairy herd would also be a challenge for the farmer himself to obey the laws of growth and help others in their growth and development. He should help the farmer appreciate the fact that God's great family needs food, clothing, and shelter, and that every task, be it ever so humble, can be performed in the spirit of the Master provided the performing of these tasks will help to bring up God's great family in achieving the abundant and eternal life. The rural minister should help the farmer feel that Christ is riding with him on the tractor or walking with him as he follows the plow, disk, and harrow. Really, it seems to me that one of the greatest challenges that comes to the rural minister is that of helping the farmer feel and appreciate the relationship between the common, everyday tasks and the building of the Kingdom of God in the world, by helping him see the significance of loving God with his mind and the strength his body produces day by day as well as with all his heart and soul.

Along with interpreting the common tasks in terms of religion, the rural minister needs to develop the ability and art of taking the great and enduring messages and teachings of the Bible and making them as vivid and real as the growing crops and the changing seasons. The minister must make it clear to the people before whom he lives and to whom he preaches that every human being in the world lives by the Bible either obeying or disobeying the principles and teachings set forth by the prophets, Christ and the disciples, and all the others who made a contribution toward making available the most marvelous and significant book that will ever be produced in this world. Many of our problems in the social and economic order and much of our flabbiness in accepting and living in accordance with the teaching of the Son of God can be traced to a lack of understanding and appreciation of the place of the teaching of the Bible in our individual family group and national life.

A prophet of old said: "Where there is no vision the people perish." Today millions of our people are perishing because of a lack of vision. The constant deadening noise and confusion of our age tends to destroy the keen edge of living. A lack of respect for personality on the part of our economic and social order tends to bring life down to a dead level. Millions of those dwelling in the countryside as well as in the city are feeling more and more that they are what seems to them a mere cog in a more or less heartless machine.



Insecurity haunts many of our people in their daily struggle to keep soul and body together by providing for the bare necessities of life. Many of our people have been taught to look to the government and not to God nor the church for salvation. The secularization that has been sapping the life and vitality of urban life is also through the radio, the daily press, and commercialized recreation, seeping into every nook and corner of rural America. The race is on now between urban and rural ideals and standards, with those emanating from our cities in the lead. If this race continues until the rural homes imitate the city homes in showing a lack of respect for childhood and the coming generation then, the beginning of the end of our glorious civilization will have begun.

Only rural ministers with convictions and a high sense of mission can help stay the tide of secularization that is spreading across America, preparing our people for some kind of regimentation and dictatorship. This tendency presents a great challenge to the rural minister. To meet the challenge he must have more than a white-collar conception of Jesus Christ which makes him only as good or a little better than the best minister or layman of his acquaintance. He must think of Jesus Christ as coming down through the centuries, the greatest conqueror of all history. He must say to the people without a shadow of doubt in his mind and heart that the greatest challenge that comes to man is the challenge of so living that all who come in contact with him will become better acquainted with the saving and redeeming grace of Him who is able to save to the uttermost.

The rural minister must come to grips with reality. Today, too many of our ministers are dealing with straw men and straw women. They do not know or appreciate the people who live across the street or along the trails of the main highways. No minister is calling in thousands of our rural homes, and many of the people are wearing a beaten path to the relief office. It is among these disadvantaged people that the smaller sects, with their message of escape from reality tending toward fanaticism, are finding a hearty response. In fact we have many evidences that a revival of religion is on. It is expressing itself in many ways. Some are praying for a revival because they can see the foundations of our civilization cracking. Others are weary, burdened, and disillusioned, looking for relief or escape from reality and the mess they are in, while others, and the number is increasing, are praying for guidance and help in an effort to get a clearer picture of the vision for a nobler, truer, and better life.

These are days of great opportunity for rural ministers who are called of God, to live and preach the gospel of the Son of God in terms of soils and souls, minds and bodies, personal salvation and social relationship, the material and the spiritual, church and state, time and eternity; ministers with clear minds, warm hearts, strong wills, and a dynamic faith, who love people and feel at home in the humblest cottage and in the majestic palace; ministers who believe that this is indeed a good world for the purpose for which it was created; ministers who in the pulpit, in the homes, along the highways, and in all their relationships of life, help people to sense and feel the great throbbing, loving heart of God the Creator and sustainer of the universe; ministers with vision who can see challenge and direct the untapped resources for high adventure and noble living in many of our rural people; ministers who know the resources as revealed through Christ and can, by putting their hands in Christ's hands, help to bring God and man, heaven and earth closer together.